

The Prevalence and the Product of Sexual Objectification  
as Occurring in Woody/Shales Hall

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

July 2015

Expected Date of Graduation

July 2015

## Abstract

This thesis takes a closer look at the causes, expressions, and effects of sexually objectifying behavior as were observed in Woody/Shales Hall at Ball State University over the course of an academic year. Narratives experienced firsthand throughout the year in which sexually objectifying behavior was witnessed were recorded, which show what the issue looks like on an interpersonal level, and research into many of the facets of sexual objectification provides an explanation as to what is truly influencing it. Music, visual entertainment, and social media all appeared to play larger roles in the influence. As for the expression of sexual objectification, behavior from students living in the residence hall ranges from passive and unseen to offensive and overt. The risks are then analyzed, showing what can result from continued objectification, both for the objectified and the objectifier. Once the situation has been fully laid out, possible actions that can be taken toward eliminating sexual objectification on campus are discussed.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Rachael Smith, M. A., at Ball State University for helping to inspire this thesis and advising the writing and to Stephanie Metzger for the encouragement and long nights spent working on our theses.

## Introduction

Toward the end of my junior year last year, a suitemate and I decided we wanted to stay on campus but move from our current hall to a different residence hall the next academic year. We made the decision to live in Woody/Shales Hall, a hall predominantly occupied by freshmen and underclassmen. Both of us were looking forward to the change, but in retrospect, we were not well prepared for just how radical the change would be.

During “Welcome Week,” the first week of the fall semester, everyone on our floor went outside to have a policy meeting with our Resident Assistant. He asked us all to go around in the circle sharing our name, major, and an interesting fact about ourselves. After a few ordinary responses, someone decided that the interesting fact he wants the rest of the floor to know is that he loves “big-ass bitches.” This is followed by rowdy laughter and affirmation, and for the rest of the introductions, roughly a third of the other residents shared similar “interesting facts.” When it was my turn to share, I said, “About thirty million people are currently suffering under human trafficking. Sorry this fact isn’t as fun.” This was greeted only by blank stares and silence.

What happened during that first meeting was nothing new to me, but it was without question the most extreme circumstance of sexual objectification coming from my peers that I had so far experienced in my college career. Little did I know it at the time, but this was only a slight unveiling of what would eventually be revealed to me as a highly detrimental issue.



## The Problem

Sexual objectification of women is the treatment of a woman's body or parts of her body as being separate from her person and as a physical object for sexual satisfaction for the one objectifying (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). This manifests itself in the objectifier viewing the objectified as being something other than human. Although both parties exist as individuals and are equal in their nature as human beings, the objectifier demotes the value of the objectified to something that can be used for the promotion of personal desires.

Some have used the argument that sexual objectification is simply admiring the beauty of another. However, this is a very misconstrued opinion. Sexual objectification is different from sexual attraction because while sexual attraction recognizes and values the individuality and personality of the desired person, sexual objectification reduces and sometimes entirely removes those facets, thus resulting in the creation of an object.

As expressed in Ball State's *Beneficence Pledge*, the statement of items that everyone at Ball State University has sworn to uphold and adhere to, each community member pledges "to act in a socially responsible way" and "to treat each person in the Ball State community with civility, courtesy, compassion, and dignity" (Ball State University, 2015a). Unfortunately, we have fallen far short from this responsibility. The widespread and largely unnoticed presence of sexual objectification in the residence halls strongly evidences that not only does it threaten the safety of those who have been objectified, but it also negatively contributes to the climate of the Ball State University. Because of this, action must be taken to reduce its occurrence.

An immense number of issues are closely related to sexual objectification, showing that the problem at hand is much more systemic rather than isolated. Prostitution, pornography

addiction, paraphilia, sexual abuse, domestic violence, self-objectification, eating disorders, and a loss of a sense of safety are within the range of issues that stem from sexual objectification (Lustig, 2012). Although all of these outcomes are not explicitly present at the university, the potential risk is constantly present.

Perhaps one the most damaging results of sexual objectification for women is the internalization of the objectification they have undergone. Studies have shown that sexual objectification of women leads to self-objectification, viewing of oneself as an object, which in turn leads to body shame. This self-objectification leads to an unhealthy sense of competition, lowered self-esteem, body monitoring, and the risk of stronger psychosocial distress that may result in more complicated psychological complications (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

### **The Prevalence**

One easily noticeable difference in the residence hall this year, as opposed to my previous hall, was the frequency of music being played in dorms that was audible throughout the hallway. Another related difference was that in the shower room, residents would often play music on their phones. Commonly, this music was highly sexualized lyrically. Many of the songs that could be heard in these settings contained descriptions of coercive or forceful sexual acts with disparaging language directed toward women. In a study undertaken at Brigham Young University, popular music with sexualized lyrics by male artists from 1959 to 2009 increased steadily to constituting 32.1% of all male lyrics. The researchers hypothesized that as this rate continues to grow, sexuality educators will have an increasingly taxing responsibility nurturing the development of healthy sexual relationships (Hall, West, & Hill, 2012). Unfortunately, this postulate is seemingly true. Even within the past decade, a significant

increase in the trend of sexually aggressive lyrics has been noticed. Consider the verse in hip-hop artist Juicy J's popular song "Bandz A Make Her Dance" as rapped by Lil Wayne:

Uh, pop that pussy for a real nigga  
 Pull out my black card, that's my lil' nigga  
 Make a movie with your bitch, Steven Spiel-nigga  
 Smokin' on Keysha, Cole give me chills nigga  
 What's your real name, and not your stripper name  
 I make it rain on ya, like a windowpane  
 Bands a make her dance, Tunechi make her cum  
 Hit it from the side like a motherfuckin' bass drum  
 Two hoes on one fuckin' pole  
 Two hoes on my fuckin' pole  
 I don't tip, I pay bills  
 Bitches call me Buffalo  
 Her stomach in, her ass out  
 I'm flyer than the ones they pass out  
 If money grow on trees, I branched out  
 I'm just waitin' for my bitch to cash out! (AZLyrics, 2015)

This is just one of many songs that could be heard frequently in the hall. The obscenity and sexually explicit and aggressive nature of the lyrics is undeniable. According to the aforementioned research completed at Brigham Young University, it is songs such as these that are negatively impacting the development of healthy sexual relationships and interpersonal behavior.

Musical preference can be influenced by personality, and personality can affect musical preference. It can be argued that both modes are present in the case of the residents. Although correlation does not necessarily imply causation, it was found to be significant that the majority of the music audibly played throughout the year did revolve around sexual themes with a tone toward the depreciation of women. One very recent occurrence happened while taking a shower.

A group of three other residents who were in the showers began to freestyle rap. They were trading lines between themselves, each contributing one after another. As for the content of the lyrics, the majority were derogatory toward women and sexually explicit. Some common terms they used were “slut,” “whore,” “pussy,” “ass,” and “fuck.” Such themes as seen in their improvised lyrics arose from the content of the music that they frequently listen to.

Peer influence is another major contributing factor to the issue. Most frequently, sexual objectification of women occurring among groups, not individuals, of male residents on the floor was witnessed. For example, in one instance at the drinking fountain, two of the residents were standing in the hall having a conversation. A passerby would be able to make out that they were commenting on and rating the bodies of athletes on various women’s teams at Ball State. Apparently, one of the residents had encountered one of the athletes at the Jo Ann Gora Student Recreation & Wellness Center, and as he relates, “The whole time I was working out, I was like [staring gesture]. That’s what you gotta do... There’s this bitch doin’ squats...” The other resident then followed up these statements with a comment about how “hot [the female athletes] are”. The first resident, in affirmation, replied, “I don’t go for *ehh*; I go for *damn*.”

Many other misogynistic conversations occurred throughout the school year, which provides ample evidence that peer influence plays a strong role in the expression of sexual objectification. It has been found that peers who exhibit deviance increase their deviant behavior when in a group of similarly deviant individuals (Matsueda & Anderson, 1998); this is a conclusion that has certainly shown itself during this academic year because as many residents were kind and respectful when in conversation with me, around one another they would descend into misogynist and objective behavior.

People who would not typically refer to women so derogatorily seemed to change when they were around specific people, as if they were then encouraged to contribute to the issue as a way of seemingly fitting in more with the crowd and being more likeable. It is very backwards that they would think this insulting and harmful behavior would make them more likeable, but that does seem to be how it has worked for them so far this academic year.

Another pathway by which people are socialized to behavior leading to sexual objectification is the portrayal of women in media. This can be seen in films, television shows, magazine articles, and advertising. The focus in objectifying media is to reduce the scope of the message from the women to specific parts of the women's bodies. This is especially prevalent in advertising, so much so that the phrase "sex sells" holds legitimacy. When companies choose to hypersexualize women in an attempt to sell their product, they are selling less of the product and more of a fantasy for sexual satisfaction. During the 2015 Super Bowl, my residence hall hosted a viewing party. As is characteristic of the Super Bowl, this year's commercial time slots portrayed many examples of sexual objectification. Perhaps the most blatant of these was a commercial for Carl's Jr. featuring model Charlotte McKinney strutting naked through a farmer's market. The comments that came from the residents were a clear indicator that this advertisement achieved its goal of making the product more desirable. However, it also led to them making objectifying comments about her body, seeing her solely as an object for sexual satisfaction, and now that they had seen they could sexual objectify women like the commercial did without consequence, their behavior changed to be more emboldened to sexually objectify.

At different times during the school year, Resident Assistants are required to create informative bulletin boards. Typically these revolve around seasonal subjects, holidays,

diversity, policies, or other areas of interest. In Woody/Shales Hall this year, the boards were situated so that they can be seen as soon as one enters the floor from the center stairwell.

Curiosity struck me one day when I made it up the stairs and was passing by as the phrase “The Guy Code” was bannered across the top of the board. Inspecting it more closely, a smaller informative sheet gave the reader more details, as following:

Guy Code is the instinctive behaviors of man having to do with everything that encompasses his earthly world in the matters of accountability, rationality, ambition, decision-making, enlightenment, foresight, pleasure, etc. There is no one sentence that can sum up Guy Code and all it represents but rather a collection of guidelines that will reveal its significance and how it is present in the everyday life of man. Read, learn, enjoy, and more importantly pass it on to fellow brothers of men and never forget what being a man is all about.

The other sheets on the board continued on to outline ten “Rules of Guy Code.” Some of them were homophobic, such as Rule #1: “When at the movie theater with another man, you must have one empty seat between both men.” Others were blatantly insulting, like Rule #4: “Unless you are under the age of 11 or wearing a bathing suit do not wear tighty whities. It still escapes all reasoning as to why they even make them in adult sizes.” (See the appendix for the complete set of rules in “The Guy Code”).

Personal opinions and statements like these and the hypermasculinity behind them are nothing but unhelpful in fostering an accepting and respectful community environment. A 2003 study at the University of Georgia found evidence suggesting that high levels of hypermasculinity could indicate a risk for violence against women (Parrott & Zeichner, 2003). If this correlation is true, then it can be concluded that the promotion of a hypermasculine lifestyle is detrimental to reducing the causes and effects of sexual objectification in the residence hall populations. A much more helpful bulletin board, for instance, could focus on how masculinity has been defined among various cultures around the world. The only redeeming quality of the

board was Rule #9: “Treat everyone with respect and always be a gentleman,” such vague and inapplicable advice that it can easily be disregarded. It is hard to cover such a gaping wound with only such a small bandage.

The outward expression of sexual objectification that was noticed with the highest frequency was the male residents holding prolonged gaze after the bodies of female residents. This happened everywhere around the residence complex. People would be stared at as they passed by dorm rooms, walking through the lobby, sitting in the food court, and entering and exiting the building. The times when it was found to be the most noticeable were in the food court at dinnertime. One of the friends I made over the course of the year was especially guilty of this; when eating dinner together, he would indiscriminately watch as girls would walk to and from their tables, letting his gaze linger much longer than with which one would be comfortable. During one instance, he said to me, “Dude, that girl looks hot. I don’t know if she is, but she looks like it from the back.” This statement clearly exhibits how sexual objectification results from staring at these women. He had decreased her person to an object of sexual satisfaction, neglecting not the front half of her body but her entire personality, thoughts, attitudes, experiences, and existence. According to existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, even the possibility of being looked at can cause one to view oneself as an object (Sartre, 1943). How much more would staring of a sexual nature induce sexual objectification of the person under gaze? Very infrequently would the people he was staring at notice him, but the times they did notice or that it was mentioned led to him making excuses or awkward dismissal of his actions.

When a group of male residents were dining together, the occurrence was augmented even more. This, also, would most commonly take place in the food courts. They would point

out girls to each other, make comments back and forth, and, for the most part, not do it so quietly that they avoided bystander attention. Regardless of others noticing, nothing seemed to hinder this activity. At times, this would directly lead to catcalling.

Perhaps the most damaging expression of sexual objectification from the residents observed this year was the occurrence of catcalling on campus. Catcalling is a form of sexual harassment involving either loud whistles or sexual comments at a passerby (Oxford Dictionaries). Appendix K of Ball State's Student Code defines sexual harassment as "any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favor or other unwelcome verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature" (Ball State University, 2015c). To expand on these definitions, catcalling brings unwanted sexual attention to the person being catcalled. This is a form of sexual objectification because as the female body is referred to and viewed as an object from which one can possibly obtain sexual satisfaction, the respect that the objectifier feels obligated to show to the person being objectified decreases. This in turn causes less restraint of vocalizing disrespectful, hurtful, and sexually suggestive comments, which feeds back into a continuous cycle of more catcalling and more objectification.

Catcalling was especially prevalent outside of the actual hall, and it particularly happened after dark. Approaching the entrance to the residence hall complex, one could frequently hear remarks being yelled down from open windows floors above. When one of my friends was in my room, he yelled out, "Hey sugar, why don't you come over here and give Daddy some candy?" to one girl walking past and, "That's not bad! Someone went tanning... Who are you?!" to another girl. After these comments, he said to me and my roommate, "Good thing I don't live here, because someone would come over here and whoop your asses." He realized that his



actions were wrong but continued to behave in that manner despite acknowledging his own assessment and still failed to understand the true consequences.

This catcalling of women on campus leads to decreased levels of perceived safety. On many occasions, female friends have asked me to walk them back home from parties or other gatherings at the end of the night because they felt unsafe walking on or around campus during those hours. Their feelings are not ill-founded. In 2013, Ball State University Police Department handled 18 reports of forcible sex offenses. Compared to 2012, with 11 reports, and 2011, with 9 reports, this shows a steep increase in the amount of cases. In 2013, BSUPD initiated the inclusion of crimes falling under the Violence Against Women Act. With these newly-added categories, 2013 saw the reporting of 3 cases of domestic violence, 7 cases of dating violence, and 6 cases of stalking. Data is currently unavailable for 2014, but further research is encouraged for that year and future years once the information is made available to identify any trends that may exist, whether the number of reports increases or decreases (Ball State University, 2014).

Another destructive manifestation of sexual objectification takes place on social media. Many social media sites and apps create a forum for objectification to occur; through the ability to share an unlimited number of pictures and video with an unlimited number of people, the stakes are high. One social media presence in particular has had an inordinate contribution to the sexual objectification of women at Ball State University. This is the Twitter account @BsuFessions. People associated with the university can submit tweets via a form on another website which the operator or operators of @BsuFession then anonymously share on the Twitter feed. Through their Instagram and Snapchat accounts, @BsuFession also shares submissions.

They will frequently encourage users to submit photos using hashtags with the opportunity to win contests. Often, the photos that receive the most favorites, votes, or attention are of a sexually objectifying nature. For instance, the figure below shows the winner of a selfie contest for tickets to see 2 Chainz, an American hip-hop artist.

This photo is an excellent example of the majority of the content posted to the account. The glorification of sexual objectification like this could be seen in many of the posts. Out of the 49 photos posted since the beginning of 2015, 48 of them showed only female bodies without faces, 44 of which were exposed in either undergarments or fully nude, while only 2 showed female faces. This is compared to 2 pictures of male bodies, 1 of which is exposed, while 6 faces are shown. This disproportionate amount of females to males and the high rate of female exposure or nudity should be alarming.



	Male	Female
Face	6	2
Body	2	48
Exposure/Nudity	1	44

Table showing the breakdown of 49 photos on @BsuFessions from 1/2015 to 5/2015.

Other tweets that had been posted include, “Follow us on [Instagram], we post stuff you are too afraid to retweet on Twitter,” “If more girls sent in booty pics it would make my classes

go a lot better. Need something to keep [me] entertained,” “This warmer weather means booty will be hanging out of shorts soon,” and “Pornhub was there for me when you weren't.” Tweets such as these exhibit a strongly misogynistic attitude among a certain demographic on campus that can clearly lead to a lack of a sense of safety and respect.

The awareness of campus sexual assault has dramatically risen over the past few years. The recent film documenting the story of Andrea Pino and Annie Clark, two survivors and of sexual assault and advocates of university response, called *Hunting Ground*, has been instrumental in keeping this issue in the light. They report that 88% of sexual assault cases go unreported, which is the result of victim shaming, poor university responses, and the excusing of assaulters' behaviors (Ziering & Dick, 2015). This is positive progress to acknowledge a large obstacle to achieving safety and respect for everyone on campus, but more must be done. Realizing that the issue with on-campus sexual assault is oftentimes directly related and deeply rooted into sexual objectification, action must be taken to end such behavior.

### **The Solution**

The one rare moment of self-consciousness and lucidity in the residence hall occurred while walking downstairs. I heard from a few flights below me a group of three residents talking disrespectfully about women. As I was passing by them in the stairwell, one of them says to the group, “Dude, what if there was a girl walking down the stairs?”

What if there were? Would they have been ashamed of what they were saying? Would the girl have felt threatened or embarrassed? This shows that at least this one student, out of all of them, was considering the repercussions of their actions. This kind of attitude is necessary to adopt in order to alleviate this problematic issue. How, though, can it be instilled in all of the

residents, especially those ones who very actively participate in the sexual objectification of women?

Over the course of this year, so many instances of this issue have been observed that it has become undeniably clear that something must be done to help. The eradication of sexual objectification from Ball State's residence halls does seem like an over-ambitious goal in this present moment, but it is one that should be pursued for the sake of safety and respect for everyone on campus. Positive and tangible steps can be taken toward reducing sexual objectification.

One change that could be made to assist in the reduction of sexual objectification by students living in residence halls is the regulation of what materials can be displayed in the dormitories by the residents. Universities exist in Indiana that have enacted such policies, such as Taylor University and Indiana Wesleyan University for religious ideologies and Purdue University (Indiana Wesleyan University, 2014; Purdue University, 2015; Taylor University, 2014). Currently, both Ball State University and Indiana University limit and prohibit room decoration only on the basis of fire safety (Ball State University, 2015b; Indiana University, 2015). If policies were to be put into place restricting the display of sexually objectifying or sexually explicit or suggestive material, especially visual media, then it could simply produce a pretense that the issue is being solved. Even though these kinds of materials could be considered a form of sexual harassment, and therefore already punishable according to Ball State's student code, the limiting of the media would not necessarily result in behavioral change from the residents. The policy would be difficult to enforce, as it would either operate on a basis of pre-approval of room decoration by residence hall staff or disciplinary action being taken when

policy is not followed. This would result in a disproportionate amount of work being done for each case compared to the amount of change that is effectively produced if student behavior is not significantly affected.

Perhaps a better solution would be to hold informative presentations explaining what sexual objectification is and what the resulting consequences are. All incoming freshmen, freshmen transfers, and advanced transfers are offered to attend Ball State University's orientation program. During new student orientation, students are exposed to presentations from various organizations to help them adjust to college living. What better time is there to inform them of the detrimental effects of sexual objectification and the risks it presents to developing healthy interpersonal relationships among their peers? One disadvantage of such a program, though, would be that it only addresses new students. Therefore, if this were to be implemented during a given year, it would require at least four years for the entire student body to have been presented the information as they attend the university.

Another program in place designed to acclimate new students to the university is "Welcome Week," but what is different about "Welcome Week" from orientation is that all students who are living in the residence halls must attend the hall meetings. Freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors still living on campus would be present to receive the information. The floor meetings are typically led by the Resident Assistant, with a "Welcome Week" leader present at times. Routine information is usually discussed, such as conduct in the halls and other rules. As told in the opening narrative, this year's floor meeting during "Welcome Week" did not proceed according to the respectful atmosphere and attitude that we were instructed to observe. This problem could perhaps be rectified by a short program

informing new students about the manifestations and consequences of sexual objectification. A program such as this one could possibly be facilitated by a number of residence hall staff members. As a former “Welcome Week” leader, I believe that adequate training could be administered to the leaders within the training sessions occurring prior to “Welcome Week”. In addition, Resident Assistants must undergo a semester-long class, EDHI 200, to be trained in the rights and responsibilities. In conversation, a former Resident Assistant revealed that they are required to report all instances of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Supplemental training about sexual objectification would be congruent with the training they receive to handle these similar situations.

One final method of informing the students living in campus residence halls about sexual objectification and its effects is the sharing of written media. This could be manifested as posters hung in the halls, flyers distributed to residents, or pamphlets made available at the front desks of the residence halls. This method may not be the most effective in ensuring that the residents receive the information, and because it lacks face-to-face interaction between the presenter and the audience, convictions may not develop as strongly as possible. However, a clear benefit of this method would be that the residents could access the information at any time they would want it.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of two semesters of observing, researching, and writing for this thesis, I have seen my attitude and thought patterns toward the issue of sexual objectification greatly evolve. I have become more aware of its prevalence since I began actively focusing on it for the purpose of this writing. As I have gotten closer with some of the residents on the floor, I have

seen more of their dark sides. I have grown to be more critical of my own responses to situations in which sexual objectification may occur.

In summary, completing this thesis has positively contributed to the development of a more culturally-sensitive, feminist mindset. I have had opportunities to engage with residents on my floor in conversations about sexual objectification and other topics relating to women's issues. These conversations have been eye-opening to how my peers think about and talk about such topics. I do regret not beginning my research earlier in the academic year to obtain a more comprehensive and dynamic perspective of how the attitudes and behaviors of the residents changed over the course of the past two semesters.

In light of this, I do plan to continue looking for instances of sexual objectification that I will encounter in throughout my future, whether in media, in conversation, or by overhearing it. The problem of sexual objectification is incredibly prevalent on campus, and the product of it is highly destructive. This is not an issue that will solve itself or that can simply be swept under the rug. It is one which we must face boldly, with the hope of creating a safer world for everyone.

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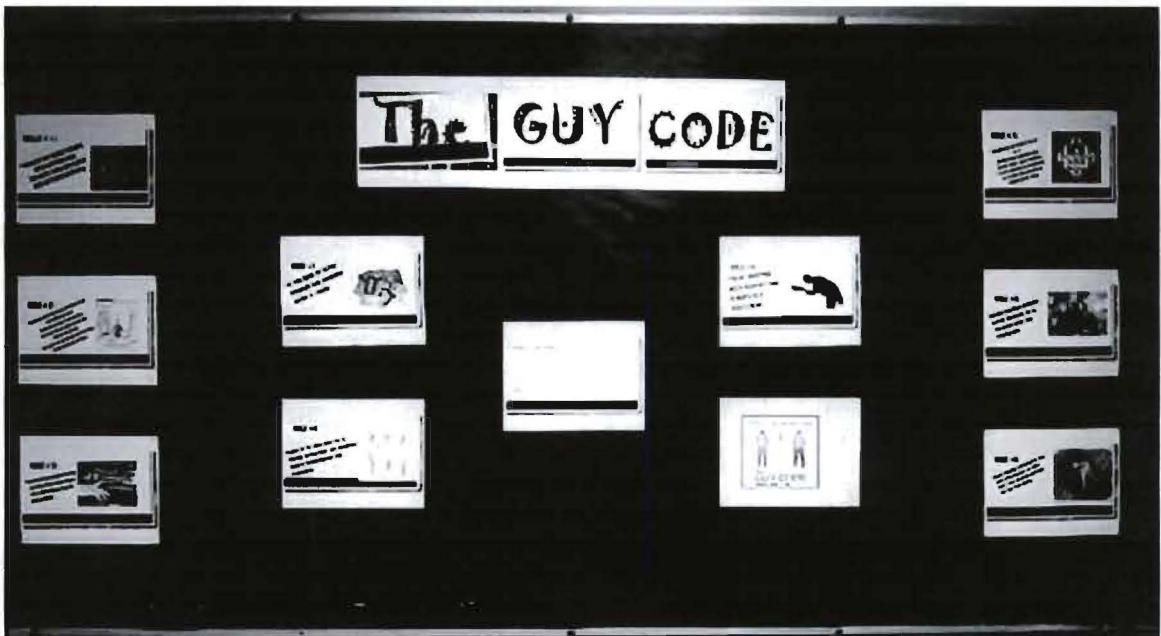
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## Appendix A

## Guy Code

**RULE # 1:**

**• WHEN AT THE MOVIE THEATER  
WITH ANOTHER MAN,  
YOU MUST HAVE ONE EMPTY  
SEAT BETWEEN BOTH MEN.**



## RULE # 2:

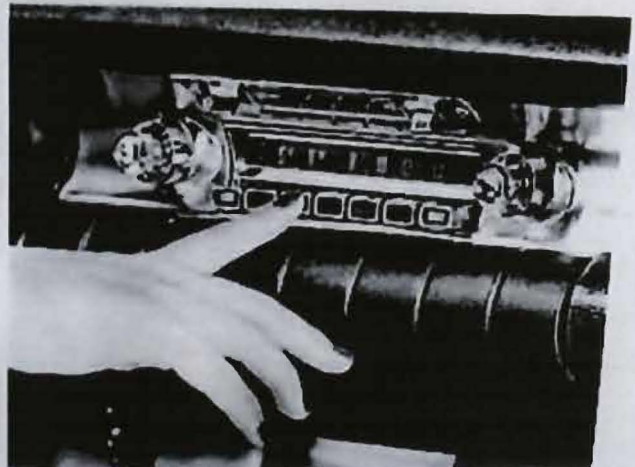
- UNLESS A GUY FRIEND SLEPT WITH YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER WHO STOLE YOUR POWER SAWN, YOU MUST BAIL A MAN OUT OF JAIL WITHIN 24 HOURS BUT ARE NOT EXPECTED TO POST BAIL WITH YOUR OWN MONEY.



"It's amazing the change in his attitude since he took up knitting."

## RULE # 3:

- A MAN SHOULD NEVER TOUCH ANOTHER MAN'S CAR RADIO WITHOUT HAVING VERBAL PERMISSION!



## RULE # 4:

- UNLESS YOU ARE UNDER THE AGE OF 11 OR WEARING A BATHING SUIT, DO NOT WEAR TIGHTY WHITIES. IT STILL ESCAPES ALL REASONING AS TO WHY THEY EVEN MAKE THEM IN ADULT SIZES.





## **RULE #5**

- **BEFORE DATING A BUDDIES SISTER, BROTHER, OR EX, YOU MUST FIRST ASK PERMISSION.**



## **RULE #6**

- **WHEN A FRIEND IS INTOXICATED, TAKE THEIR KEYS AND DON'T LET THEM TWEET, POST, OR SHARE ANYTHING THAT THEY WILL REGRET.**



## **RULE #7**

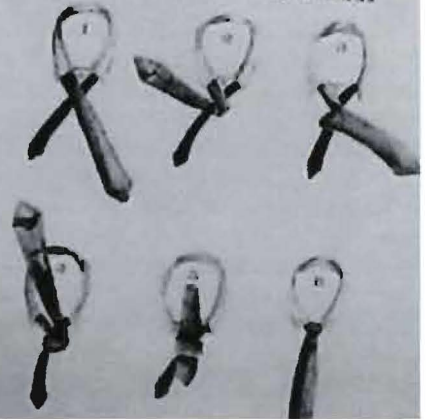
- **IF YOU HAVE AN EXTRA CONDOM AND SOMEONE NEEDS IT, SHARE.**



## RULE #8

• LEARN TO TIE YOUR OWN TIE. IN  
FORMAL SITUATIONS, NOT KNOWING  
HOW IS EMBARRASING AND  
DEGRADING.

### HOW TO TIE A TIE



## RULE #9

TREAT EVERYONE  
WITH RESPECT AND  
ALWAYS BE A  
GENTLEMAN.



CODE #28

RESPECT THE BUFFER ZONE

